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ABSTRACT

Historically, little has been written or researched about British rural youth. Since the late 1970s, however, largely as a result of initiatives within the Youth Service, rural youth have become identified as a separate, definable area of concern and study. The present trend toward high unemployment is hitting young people particularly hard, especially in rural areas where population growth is imposing additional pressures. Rural girls are not signing up as unemployed but are being kept at home to help with domestic work so that boys can get first choice of available jobs. Declining public transport combined with dispersal of resources leads to real problems of diminished accessibility in domestic life, work prospects, and cultural or recreational facilities. Particularly at the secondary level there are disadvantages with rural schooling; distances between home and school make the link between difficult to maintain, it is harder for rural teachers to partake of in-service training, and a school based on bus time tables prevents, or at best seriously limits, opportunities for extra-curricular activities. There is need for much greater research into conditions, needs, and aspirations of rural youth as a special group facing problems in an urbanised society. (BRR)

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INVISIBLE IN THE RURAL LANDSCAPE

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David Marsland

An investigation and excursion into the British literature of Rural Youth

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INVISIBLE IN THE RURAL LANDSCAPE

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> Before going away I used to think that village life wasn't too bad. However, I now am in the Navy and realise that there is far more to life than a village can offer - Graeme (17) (14)

> I think that living in the country, for all the sentimental denials, is something which is held in contempt by most people today. They believe that one has opted out of a concern for all kinds of problems - Countryside Poet (6)

In Britain, which in terms of town-sizing, urban/rural population balance, and agricultural workforce, is arguably the most urbanised nation in the world, we have a cultural romantic belief in the countryside which is a mixture of mistaken nostalgia, fantasy and historical misunderstanding, together with memories of childhood fiction, encouraged by the misleading stereotypes of television commercials where images of sunshine, haywains, rippling streams and cider, are accompanied by the most lyrical and pastoral of classical music and used to persuade the willing or not-so-willing to buy goods ranging from shampoo to tobacco, from chocolate to membership of the Territorial Army. Reality is very far from these images.

But having raised the question of false stereotypes, and mistaken imagery, we must define rural youth so that there is a frame of reference for our comments in this paper.

It is interesting to compare this with a later study 1958-62 by Isabel Emmett (10) in which the youth club together with the Women's Institute and Adult Education were introduced by newcomers to the village in contrast to the indigenous population, with the result in this case that these organisations were English-speaking in a predominantly Welsh-speaking area.

Emmett felt that English people were chosen to organise these newer associations because of their secretarial skills and because organisational ability relates more to the concept of the English prestige ladder. However, we feel that newcomers who have had the initiative to move from their original home probably motivated by a perceptive of freedom and traditional values in rural life, are the people more likely to be concerned with social, corporate and intellectual development.

Throughout these and the other major monographs, agriculture is seen as the predominant source of employment - predominant in overall terms, and in status. In fact there is an assumption that rural areas and areas where agriculture is the predominant employer can be taken as interchangeable concepts. This factor demonstrates the context within which the monographs have been written. For example, Llanfihangel in Wales was studied by A.D. Rees (16) over a period of eight years from 1938. Loss of population was a vital factor in this neighbourhood with family size decreasing and young worker out-migration. Amid very close kinship ties "woven together like a pig's entrails". The study revealed the clear sexual division of labour. Unmarried resident children, regardless of age, were completely dependant upon their parents, receiving only pocket money for their labour. Sons on marrying are frequently established in farming by the father while the youngest son has the responsibility of staying at home, not free to marry in his mother's lifetime, until all brothers and sisters had left home, or father decided to retire. Otherwise he would move in as surrogate son in a farm where no children remained.

Invisible in the Rural Landscape

For some reason those major monographs in Britain with greatest academic significance have a very marked bias towards upland areas, where there is a strong tradition of small family farming (18). We must also see these monographs within their historical setting. The work for these studies in Britain was undertaken between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960's. However, since the Second World War there have been rapid changes in Agriculture from being labour intensive to highly industrialised and mechanised, changes which have completely altered the social structure of village life (15). Britain now has the smallest agricultural labour force of any country in the World, with only 2% of the workforce engaged in Agriculture, Forestry or Horticulture. Because of this when studying and considering rural youth in Britain we need to think wider than the Agricultural community. Consequently many of the studies of rural youth as the potential future agricultural workforce are too narrow for this purpose.

One social trend which is of very deep significance in Britain at present is the rising level of unemployment, something hitting young people particularly hard. At the time of writing about 50% of the under 25 year olds in Britain are unemployed, and it looks as if this figure will continue rising in the foreseeable future. If we examine unemployment levels in Britain we find that these deteriorate the further away from London and the South East, and there is a high correlation between this pattern and the rural areas of population growth (2). What this means for the Rural Young Person is that the areas where unemployment is high, and where population growth is imposing additional pressure are mostly areas which are rural so that there are accessibility problems, and also frequently problems of seasonal work because of a tourism and agricultural based economy.

The authors' "Victims of Myth" paper (4), while looking at various social factors affecting rural youth, examines this in more detail, and looks at the personal problems which can be experienced by rural youth, especially the frequent case

of the individual young person, the only unemployed person in that village, cut off from any possibilities of peer-group support and encouragement. There is also the fate of the rural girls. Indications show that in increasing areas there are significant numbers of young people, especially girls, who are not signing on as unemployed, but are being kept at home to help with domestic work in the house. One commonly hears the comment "When jobs are few, its the boys who should get first choice". (4)

This narrow range of employment prospects for girls was discussed a decade before Unemployment reached its present disastrous levels in Susan Hales 1968-69 study "The Idle Hill" (11) in which concerns at the effects that young people's out-migration might have upon the rural areas left behind resulted in a study of 120 young people of rural Herefordshire, their aspirations and achievements. The book opens and closes with the same challenging question.

"Would it really matter if this (rural) way of life were watered down to the norm of modern urban and suburban life?"

At the time Susan Hale wrote her report with that challenging question, the politicians and decision-makers in Britain were very preoccupied with inner city decay and urban renewal, and consequently would probably have answered "We doubt if it does matter". There was a presenting concern with the problems of the street life resulting from inner city neglect and urban squalor, and against this to be concerned about the countryside seemed trivial by comparison. And yet gradually in the late 1970's the pressure of concern for the countryside built up. A number of reports from voluntary and statutory organisations appeared drawing attention to the decline of rural services (8) (9) (17), and the idea gradually gained acceptance that there was something identifiable as rural deprivation, a concern demanding attention.

It was about this time that Rural Youth became identified as a separate definable area of concern and study within Britain; very largely as a result of initiatives within the Youth

Service concerned with face to face work with young people. The youth service in Britain has its roots firmly in charitable work among the oppressed poor of our cities at the end of the last century, the first voluntary organisations were urban-based, and there is still a very strong urban bias conscious and unconscious in Youth Service literature in the way it perceives young people and in the way it tackles areas of social concern such as homelessness, unemployment, delinquency, racialism and so on (1). However, it was becoming clear that there are large numbers of young people in rural areas, influenced by social factors, affected by issues, which were different but equally effective and disadvantageous. Those of us involved in this were very concerned to draw attention to this concern, to discover more about rural youth, and to examine the implications for the youth service, and these directions publicity, research and good practice have been woven together in studies and experimental work for rural youth (7).

On the research side there has been concern to identify the social factors which affect rural youth in order to build up a working profile of the issues surrounding them.

We have written above about employment and unemployment and the effect this has. One other significant factor affecting rural areas is lack of accessibility based upon deteriorating public transport, decreasing nationally at the rate of 10% a decade, most of this in the rural areas. In many rural areas such public transport as does exist is geared only to the working day and makes no provision for recreational, cultural or domestic needs in evenings or at the weekends.

Set against this is the problem of dispersal of resources as a result of economic factors or planning policy. Those responsible for planning policy and decisions refer to this process as the centralisation of resources, which is the attitude of someone at the centre; for the young person whose school is in one direction, work opportunities in another, while shops, doctor, youth club, railway station are at

different points of the compass the process can only be described as a dispersal of resources (1) (3) (4).

But it is not only the direction which is significant, distance is also a factor. Studies have shown that while young people are prepared to travel up to 13 miles for secondary facilities of cinema, dancehall or discotheque, their need for the primary facility of youth club or community centre is within six miles. Any resource outside this limit is effectively denied to them.

The difficulties of public transport combined with dispersal of resources can lead to real problems of diminished accessibility in domestic life, work prospects and cultural or recreational facilities.

There are disadvantages with rural schooling particularly at secondary level. The distances between home and school make the link between difficult to maintain, it is harder for rural teachers to partake of in-service training, and a school run to bus time-tables prevents, or at best seriously limits, opportunities for extra-curricular activities.

With the pressure to try and seek national self-sufficiency in basic crops, and modern agricultural methods using larger mechanical plant, many farmers have drastically altered the landscape, ripping out hedgerows, ploughing up ancient footpaths, planting cereals on former meadows, thereby greatly reducing the amount of open space available for public leisure use. Most town dwellers have now more access to play space and recreational areas than rural dwellers.

There is well documented evidence that poverty in real terms exists in rural areas, and there is the additional factor that many basic items are more expensive in rural areas, up to 30% more for milk and bread.

Invisible in the Rural Landscape

As we look around our colleagues in the academic world and the face to face world of youth work, we see a number of places with developing interest in rural youth and the issues affecting them. Schooling, the rural girl, employment (or unemployment) and youthwork methodology seem to be the major areas of concern and we hope that this work will come to fruition and be published in the near future.....
.....but we do feel that so far this merely scratches the surface. In our belief rural youth is an identifiable group with sociological significance and requiring experimental practical youthwork approaches. So far, apart from work with which we have been personally involved, little has been written and little experimental work has been done. The problems which rural youth face have been increasing recently in relative and absolute terms as a result of determined focussing of governmental attention and resources upon the problems of the inner city. These areas are more fashionable, more glamorous, and pull more votes.

We believe it is time and past time for the neglect of rural youth to be acknowledged and corrected. The needs of rural youth must be accepted into the regular concerns of the youth service. Their needs, their rights count for as much as those of young people anywhere and everywhere. In addition to this process there is a need for much greater research into the condition needs and aspirations of rural youth in an urbanised society as a special group facing problems and very differing conditions to those of their forbears.

Why should youth be invisible in the rural landscape?

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